

## The Disciple and the Spiritual Christian

What is God's desire for those saved by grace through faith in Christ? In the Gospels, it is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ on the path to Christlikeness. But in the Epistles, where the words *disciple* and *discipleship* are not used, we find a different perspective on God's desire for believers. Those authors, especially the Apostle Paul in First Corinthians 2:6-3:4, use various terms to describe the spiritual state of people. They are helpful categories though not always clearly delineated.

### The disciple in the Gospels and Acts

A disciple is a follower or learner who desires to be like his master or teacher (Matt. 10:25a). In the Gospels, *disciples* refers predominantly to those who are Jesus' followers on a path of deeper commitment but is used once of unbelievers (John 6:60-66). In Acts, all Christians are called disciples because the story of Acts is about obedient Christians carrying out Jesus' command to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). Committed and growing Christians are the norm in Acts, which is why the exceptions are given special mention (Acts 5:1-11; 8:9-24).

### The missing disciple in the Epistles

In the Epistles, *disciple* and *discipleship* are not mentioned. Instead, we see the exhortation to imitate the Apostle Paul who imitates Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). As interpreters of Jesus' teaching, the authors of the Epistles chose to describe the character qualities of various kinds of people, which implicitly includes disciples. The goal of Jesus and the authors of the Epistles is the same: Christlikeness. However, the Epistles differ in that believers today have the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit Who was given at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4; 1 Cor. 6:19).

### Four kinds of people in the Epistles

Without using the words *disciple* or *discipleship*, the Epistles instead describe various spiritual states of people who could be considered disciples.

**The natural person.** This kind of person is described in 1 Corinthians 2:14: "*But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*" These people are unregenerate. They may be able to understand the facts of the gospel message but consider it foolishness. They cannot discern and will not embrace its spiritual implications. An example is the Jewish leaders who knew Jesus' teaching but did not respond in faith to accept it (John 5:29-30; 8:43).

**The spiritual person.** The Apostle Paul contrasts the natural man with God's ideal for every believer: to be *spiritual*, "*But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For 'who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?' But we have the mind of Christ*" (1 Cor. 2:15-16). Clues in the context help define spiritual people. They are referred to as *mature* (1 Cor. 2:6) who comprehend *the deep things of God* as taught them by the Spirit of God giving them the ability to judge and discern spiritual truth (1 Cor. 2:7-13). Another way of saying this is that they have "*the mind of Christ*" (v. 16). Unlike the natural person, the spiritual person welcomes and embraces the things of God. Those who are spiritual cannot be judged by those who are not, for the latter lack spiritual discernment. Paul immediately contrasts the spiritual person with the natural person to emphasize God's ideal for every believer.

Additional insights are found in other Epistles. Romans 8:5-6 describes the spiritual person as one who sets his mind on things of the Spirit and is therefore spiritually minded. The exhortation to "walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16) and to be "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18) certainly reflect God's goal and the means for becoming a spiritual person. These passages contrast spiritual and worldly orientations.

## Number 109

Spirituality is not *produced* by outward actions but *demonstrated* in outward conduct produced by yielding to the Spirit.

Spiritual Christians are in a class of believers also described as “mature” (1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Phil. 3:15; Heb. 5:14; from the Greek *teleios*, sometimes translated as *perfect, complete*). While *mature* speaks of a believer’s state, we should understand that *maturity* is a process of time and experience during which the maturing Christian may or may not be spiritual. A comparison is the process of human growth from immature child to one who can be called *mature*. Besides spiritual discernment and comprehension of the deeper things of God, the spiritual person will demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). A good example of a mature spiritual person is the Apostle Paul himself.

**The carnal person.** Having contrasted the unbelieving natural person with the believing, mature, spiritual person, Paul addresses another class of believers that he calls *carnal* (*sarkikos, fleshly, worldly*—as opposed to godly): “<sup>1</sup>And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. <sup>2</sup>I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; <sup>3</sup>for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? <sup>4</sup>For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?” (1 Cor. 3:1-4).

Paul must speak to these carnal believers as if he is speaking to spiritual infants (“babes in Christ”). He characterizes them as unwilling and therefore unable to comprehend the deeper teaching of God’s truth called “solid food.” Other characteristics are envy, strife, and divisions, which are at the root of the problems in the Corinthian church. A similar description in Hebrews 5:12-13 describes the readers who neglected their spiritual growth so that they are like immature babies who are “unskilled in the Word of Righteousness.” Galatians describes those who walk according to the flesh as those opposed to the Spirit and who commit the same sins as unbelievers (Gal. 5:17-21; See GraceNotes no. 96, “Understanding the Vice Lists in 1 Cor. 6:9-11, Gal. 5:19-21, and Eph. 5:3-5”)

This state is not pleasing to God. The carnality of the believer is due to their spiritual neglect and love for the world and self. An example of carnal believers is the Corinthian church. We also recognize that a maturing disciple can act carnally, as did the Apostle Peter and Barnabas (Matt. 16:22-23; Gal. 2:11-13).

**The newborn person.** Paul (and Peter) also recognizes another category of Christians, those newly born into God’s family. He calls them “babes in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1) who can only feed on baby food, or the “milk” of the Word (Heb. 5:12-13; 1 Peter 2:2). This group is not blamed for their lack of maturity or spiritual discernment unless they fail to grow and remain in infancy.

## Conclusion

While the Gospels show us that a disciple of Jesus is a committed follower on a spiritual journey, the Epistles show us that within that category there are various kinds of believers from newborn Christians to carnal, mature, and spiritual. God’s ideal and normal expectation for the newborn believer is to grow to be spiritual, yielded to the Holy Spirit, having matured to that point on their discipleship journey. Another way of describing God’s ideal is to be Spirit-filled, conformed to Christ with the mind of Christ. Just as we are saved by grace, we also become spiritually mature by the gracious power and provision of God (Rom. 5:1-2; Titus 2:11-14; 2 Peter 1:2-8; 3:18). After someone believes in Christ as Savior, we must challenge them not only to become disciples, but *spiritual* disciples who are filled with and walking in the Holy Spirit. Considering the immaturity and carnality of many Christians today, we should emphasize God’s desire for all to grow in grace into mature, spiritual persons who are like Christ.

